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AUTHOR	Pruett, Robert E.
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ABSTRACT

The author begins with a description of the purpose of the Communist Party Congress and traces its development from an open forum of debate and discussion (prior to 1924) to its more conservative and restrictive position. He contends that with its current emphasis on conservatism, the Communist Party Congress has three communicative roles: (1) it is a source of information on policies decided at other levels of authority, with little debate or discussion; (2) it serves as a propaganda both for domestic and foreign audiences; and (3) it is now a public form for denouncing dissident elements within the party. (Author/RN)

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The Changing Communication Roles of the Communist Party Congress

by

Robert E. Pruett

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Introduction

The 1961 Statutes of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union establish the purpose of the Communist Party Congress.[1] In theory, the Congress is the highest organ of the Communist Party and is supposed to serve as the primary decision-making body for the policies being offered by the leaders of the party. Such a theory rests upon the idea that an elected number of representatives of the party should convene at regular intervals to decide on questions of importance and that the congress provides the democratic means for such decision-making. The function of the congress, however, has changed throughout the years. For example, prior to the death of Lenin in 1924, the congresses exhibited an atmosphere of free speech but with the rise of Stalin they became more conservative and restrictive. This does not mean that Lenin didn't attempt to assert his dominence over the party and congresses for he continued, in both the pre and post 1917 revolutionary congresses, to argue in favor of centralization and absolute control. Rather, the congresses provided Lenin and others a forum for debating issues such as party structure, party leadership, domestic policy, foreign policy, and ideology. Meyer, in his analysis of the Soviet system, has described the scene at those congresses as being "lively" with "open debates over fundamental policy issues, as well as over personnel changes."[2] In contrast, the post-Lenin congresses were held less often and the freedom of debate and discussion became much less apparent.

This growing trend of conservatism can be attributed to the following: (1) the rule against factionalism within the party; (2) the leader's/s fear of any disunity showing within the party; and (3) the fact that the delegates

to the congress have become more and more handpicked by the party's leadership.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to describe what effect the changes in the function of the congress has produced on the communication taking place within the organization and to show how it is externalized beyond the congress.

The Communicative Roles

With the demise of the congress as a forum for debate, certain roles have developed illustrating the type of communication emanating from the formal proceedings of a Communist Party Congress. First, it has become a source of information; second, it serves as a propaganda tool; and third, it has developed as a public forum for denouncing party dissidents.

As a source of information, the congress represents a channel whereby approval is given to policies decided upon at other levels of authority. In addition, as a channeling agent, the congressional representatives are responsible for disseminating the information and pronouncements to the various groups, nationalities, and factions they represent. Kenney has described this role:

> The congress proceedings constitute a source of information on current policy emphasis....the Soviet leaders have tended to convoke the congress if and when they wished to prepare the country, and sometimes the world or parts of it, for a reorientation of approach or otherwise to publicize decisions of great portent.3

For example, the Eighteenth Congress in 1939 issued a warning to the Western powers about Hitler and concluded that unless Russia was given some help, they would find some way to provide for its own security; the Nineteenth

Congress in 1952 presented Malenkov as Stalin's chosen successor; the Twentieth Congress in 1956 provided the period of collective leadership and denounced the 'cult of the personality"; and the Twenty-first Congress in 1959 verbalized the party would take in both domestic and foreign policy. In each instance, the proceedings of the congress served as a source of information for the delegates which was to be disseminated as being the "correct" path to follow in the future.

The congress has served as a forum for propaganda on two different levels: First, on an internal level related to the Soviet Union itself; and second, on an external level in regards to other national communist parties. Avtorkanov points out that as the congress has become less free in its discussions, it has assumed more of a propaganda role in which many of the party's decisions have been timed to coincide with a congress in order to achieve moral support of the entire party.[4] Kenney also affirms this role:

> For the governing elite, the congress is a propitious occasion to tell the Soviet people how many remarkable far-sighted moves have been and will be made in their behalf, to authenticate who or what is responsible for deficiencies, and to remind the world that Moscow stands for peace, democracy, brotherhood, and truth. All this the leaders did with consumate skill of articulate and imaginative propagandists.[5]

On the external level, the congress has functioned as a guide for the non-Soviet national communist parties to follow. While the congress is primarily for domestic consumption, foreign communist delegates are invited to attend and speak at the congress. For example, fifty national delegates attended the 1959 congress while eight attended the 1961 congress. The representatives of such national parties are urged to follow the dictates

of the Soviet Union and adopt similar measures to those affirmed by the congress.

A third role the congress serves is that as an agent for denouncing dissidents. Resembling a purge, such a role has become increasingly evident in the proceedings since the death of Stalin. In 1956 and 1961, the denunciations were aimed at Stalin and those who opposed Khrushchev; yet on the international level, attacks have also been made in reference to national communist parties which have deviated from the prescribed ideological Moscow party line. For example, in 1961 Khrushchev with the support of the congress leveled a charge at Albania for subscribing to a position contrary to that of peaceful coexistence which Khrushchev had proclaimed to be necessary and in keeping with Leninist teaching. This was not only a direct attack on Albania but more important, an indirect indictment of the policy that Red China was following. In the role of denunciation, the justification verbalized for such actions has been that of relying on the teachings of Marxism-Leninism. Such a role has been developed for picturing the policy advocated in the Soviet Union as one of "purity" based on Marxism-Leninism while the opponents have been described as deviationists.

Summary

The party congress no longer serves in its prescribed legislative function; rather, it provides a forum whereby policies can be verbalized according to the methods which the party hierarchy determine. Unlike the earlier congresses where open debates occurred; sessions in which arguments over party leadership and ideological confrontations took place, contemporary congresses voice unanimity. For the public, both

domestic and foreign, the congressional delegates appear to be consistent in support of the party leadership. Behind the scenes, however, the real debate takes place while on the surface all is sublime in the name of Marxism-Leninism.

Footnotes

1 Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov, "Statutes of the Communist Party," The Communist Party Apparatus (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1966), p. 192. The two most important sections describing the purpose and function of the congress are as follows:

The Party Congress is the supreme organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Congresses are convened at least once every four years. The convening of a congress and the agenda are announced not less than six weeks in advance. Extraordinary congresses are convened by the Central Committee of the party on the initiative or the demand of not less than one-third of the party's members, as represented at the preceeding congress. The Congress is valid if not less than one-half of the party membership is represented at it. The representation is determined by the Central Committee.

The congress is authorized to (1) hear and confirm the reports of the Central Committee, of the Central Inspection Committee and of other central organizations; (2) review, modify and approve the program and the statutes of the party; (3) determine the party line on questions of domestic and foreign policy and examine and decide the most important questions of communist construction; (4) elect the Central Committee and the Central Inspection Committee.

2 Alfred G. Meyer, The Soviet Political System (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 162.

3 Charles D. Kenney, "The Twentieth C.P.S.U.: A Study in Calculated Moderation," American Political Science Review, L (September, 1956), p. 764.

4 Avtorkanov, . 192-194.

5 Kenney, p. 764.